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ABSTRACT

This guide for building family/school/community partnerships uses a model in which family members and professionals are seen as mutual mentors in partnerships built on mutual caring, trust, and respect in the effort to work collaboratively toward self-sufficiency for children with disabilities. Basic ground rules for successful team relationships are listed, with practical tips for implementation. The rules include: get to know all members/potential members of the team; plan "huddles" (school meetings) at least 6 weeks in advance; prepare a written input statement including the team member's perspective regarding the child; tape record the meeting; engage in active listening; use clear, simple, and direct language; ask questions to clarify confusing/conflicting information; gain the perspective of others; engage in creative problem-solving; and recognize the validity of the child/family members' opinions. The interchangeable roles of coach, cheerleader, and referee on the team are distinguished. Special functions of the team captain or co-captains (who should be an older child or a family member) include minimizing surprises, emphasizing the child's strengths and capabilities, and engaging in action planning. (DB)

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WE CARE: Mentoring-the-Mentor for Effective Family/Professional Collaboration and Team Building

by Kathryn Moery Ed.M.

WHO ARE WE?

We are family members - parents, siblings, grandparents, friends, neighbors, etc. We are professionals - educators, community service providers, business leaders, medical personnel, etc. Our spheres of influence intersect - our children are at the center where we overlap. What happens in our families, our schools, and our communities has a profound impact on what happens to our children. We are increasingly entwined in synergistic partnerships - family members and school/community professionals helping each other to help our children grow to be self-sufficient. Good family/professional partnerships are transformational: families assume more responsibility as the primary teachers of their children, and schools/communities become more like caring families.

WHAT IS MENTORING-THE-MENTOR?

Our families and our communities have increasingly become more involved in participatory decisionmaking in our schools. Our families have taken a more active role as consumers, in choosing education and community services. .As our children grow toward autonomy and self-sufficiency, they become "the consumer" and "catalyzing partner" in bringing together the individual and collective resources of the family/school/community. Therefore, collaboration and team building among us - children, families, and professionals - is essential, but often not easily accomplished.

While recognizing that families are usually the most long-term and important relationship a child will have, and that relationships with helping professionals are time-limited (The Institute Brief, 1994), each family member/professional contribution to the partnership is valuable and complementary, but not identical.

Too often, as either family members or professionals, we come together as unwilling partners, divided by turf and territorialism. Conundrums of our family/professional relationships are described in "Families as Resources: The Art of Listening, Not Telling" (The Institute Brief, 1994):

> "The family-professional relationship is increasingly seen as one between equals...this...is not always a comfortable alliance for either party. Some professional staff have difficulty accepting this diminution of authority; others welcome this partnership but worry about abdicating responsibility. Some family members would prefer the comfort of having "experts" decide; others feel that the partnership concept gives legitimacy to professionals expecting already overburdened family members to do more" (p. 4).

Family/professional collaboration and shared decisionmaking are the capstones of the "empowerment movement" of the 90's (Turnbull, 1991). Family/ school/community partnerships also empower the individual child: "...partnership activities...engage, guide, energize, and motivate students to produce their own successes" (Epstein, 1995).

Mentoring is another strategy for "creating opportunities for personal empowerment" (White-Hood, 1993). A mentor is universally described as a caring adult engaged in a one-on-one relationship, which positively impacts another person, and is based on mutual trust and respect. Mentoring has been historically an important part of professional training, both in higher education and in business. Mentoring relationships, which provide positive adult role models and guides for our children, have helped to draw communities into partnerships with schools.

Not only do our children benefit from mentors, but as family members and professionals we mentor each other by developing relationships built on *mutual caring, trust and respect*. Partnerships are built one at a time. We build transformational partnerships, by caring for each of our partners as individuals, using trust and respect to disassociate each person from their identity as a member of a "family" or "professional" group. In building teams through mentoring, roles are not assigned/valued based on level of experience, education, title, income, cultural background, etc. because mentors are non-judgmental. Family members/ professionals build collaborative teams by caring for the child we share, and by caring for each other because of our unique and important relationship to the child. In a mentoring relationship, each member is a role model to every other member; each having a unique role, which is equally important and complementary to each other role. Through mentoring each other we form synergistic family/professional teams - positively impacting each other as guides and role models - who collaboratively work with our children (not for them or on their behalf) as they grow toward self-sufficiency.

WHAT IS FAMILY/PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION AND TEAM BUILDING?

We "co-labor" - work together/work with our children - as their family/professional helpers. We build teams. We can borrow pragmatic models of team building from sports. Sports teams have captains which lead the teams with their vision, but are also members of the team. Within each of our family/school/community teams, the child is captain of his/her team. With our captain, we share the same dream of success; share responsibility for decisionmaking to determine the best plays to move the dream to a vision; and take responsibility for performance, to move our shared vision to a "winning" reality. Under the captain's leadership, each member has a special role - position on the team - that has equal importance and value. As family/professional team members, we "level the playing field" by establishing a set of "ground rules" for sharing responsibility and working together with our child to develop "plays" that will enable him/her to envision and reach his/her goal.

GROUND RULES FOR MENTORING-THE-MENTOR

During a child's school years, we have many opportunities for family/professional collaboration and teaming. Like the contact athletes have with each other in the locker room, or while waiting on the bench, much of our contact is time- limited, casual and somewhat impersonal (school open houses, fund-raising events, school programs, etc.). Occasionally, we are called into the "huddle" as a team to engage in one-on-one participatory decisionmaking to move our child closer to attainment of his/her goal (parent/teacher conferences, individualized education and transition planning meetings for special education students, etc.). Sometimes, our team is called together to solve problems or disputes that arise when our spheres of influence collide rather than overlap (mediation, due process hearings, etc.). While our team mates may change during each "huddle", our captain (the child), and our long-term goal to help move our child to self-sufficiency remains unchanged. Even when our membership changes, we continue to maintain collaborative performance partnerships when we abide by the same ground rules to mentor each other.

Leveling the Playing Field

Get Ready...

- ***Get to know all members/potential members of the team.***
  Tip: Informal events at school are good times for introductions and informal exchanges of pleasantries and information. It's a good time for networking with school staff, other parents, and community members.
- ***Plan "huddles" (school meetings) at least six weeks in advance.***
  Tip: Although school meetings are usually planned by teachers, the team captain (older students) and/or their co-captains (family members) should also consider offering to take this responsibility and decide with the teacher how the planning role can be delegated or shared.
- ***Insure participation of all team members.***
  Tips:

- Contact team members by phone to:
  - ~ Initiate/strengthen our relationship.
  - ~ Invite us to attend school meetings.
  - ~ Suggest dates and determine our availability for school meetings.
  - ~ Gather information about our preferences for a date/time/location for the meeting.
  - ~ Determine what accommodations we might need (sign/foreign language interpreter, wheel-chair accessible entrance/site, etc.).
- Select a date that is mutually convenient to the majority.
- Prioritize child (if attending the meeting) and family member availability.
  Avoid scheduling meetings:
  - ~ During the school day when the child and school staff have classroom obligations.
  - ~ At times which conflict with family members work schedule.

~ At times/locations where participation is hampered by traveling distance, inaccessibility, or difficulty arranging care for younger children.

Instead:

~ Schedule meetings at neutral accessible locations within the child's home community to insure comfort and reduce turf/territorial conflicts (e.g. public libraries, park district fieldhouses, fast food restaurants with sectioned-off dining areas, community centers, etc.).

~ Arrange conference call or e-mail hook-up for members who can not be present at the meeting.

- ***At least three weeks in advance, send a letter (in native language of participants if other than English) confirming the meeting to each team member invited to participate, which includes:***

- Time/date/location of meeting
- Name/phone number of person making arrangements
- Purpose/agenda for meeting
- Names/affiliations/phone numbers of all team members
- Description of each member's role/relationship to the child

Tip: If you need to send a designee, or cancel, notify each team member and offer to discuss your ideas, or send written input to the meeting in your absence. After the meeting, be available to add support/resources.

Get Set...

- ***Access/review the child's pertinent school/medical records, progress reports, personal histories, intake summaries, etc.***
- ***Use these documents to prepare a written input statement which includes your perspective regarding the child's:***

- Goals, dreams, visions for the future
- Summary of child's strengths
- Summary of child's need for support
- Recommendations
- Summary of specific resources/responsibilities for which you can personally commit

Go!

- ***Sit in a circle, or next to each other at the meeting.***
- ***Wear name tags.***
- ***Sign in (in case someone has to leave early, or arrives late).***
- ***Make a seating chart on a flip chart/blackboard (optional).***
- ***Tape record the meeting.*** (eliminates need for copious notetaking. A tape recording becomes part of the child's school record, and is available for review to team members who participated, who could not participate, or for future planning).

Starting and Staying on the Same Page

We mentor each other by creating a "safe" environment for open dialogue leading to participatory decisionmaking and shared responsibility for performance. Non-verbally and verbally, we communicate that we *care, trust and respect* each other as team members. These are the cornerstones of a mentoring relationship. We "start and stay on the same page" during collaboration - building toward consensus - when we are guided by the following ground rules:

- ***Engage in active listening.***
  Avoid:
  - ~ Closed posture (e.g. folding arms, crossing legs, sitting askew or turned away on chair, tapping pencil, etc.).
  - ~ Rolling your eyes (this is both mean and demeaning).
  - ~ Averting your eyes away from speaker (looking down at notes, reading, looking around the room, at watch, etc.).
  - ~ Frowning, furling your brow, etc.

  Instead:
  - ~ Maintain an open posture (lean toward speaker)
  - ~ Maintain eye contact
  - ~ Nod/tilt your head in direction of speaker.
  - ~ Smile.
  - ~ Put a "smile" in your voice.
  - ~ Respect each other's space.
  - ~ Take notes.

- ***Use clear, simple and direct language.***
  Avoid:
  - ~ Professional jargon.
  - ~ Acronyms.
  - ~ Idioms/slang that non-native speakers of English may have difficulty understanding.

  Instead:
  - ~ Define terms.
  - ~ Explain what the acronym stands for.
  - ~ Use descriptive hand gestures.

- ***Be courteous.***
  - – Acknowledge the presence of others in the room. Don't refer to them in the third person.
    Example: "John is Steven's brother."; instead of "There is a brother in the house."
  - – Address each other appropriately and respectfully.
    Avoid: Using inappropriate or deprecating labels to address each other e.g. "mom", "dad", "son", "dear", "teacher", "the parent", etc.
    Instead: Use name, title, etc. to indicate your customary (formal or less formal) relationship to each other.

Example: (formal) Mr. Smith, Dr. Jones, Mrs. Parent, John (student); or (less formal) use first names if that is the customary practice.

- ***Share practical, up-to-date information and resources for action planning.***
- ***Listen for good ideas. Link your good ideas to others that have been shared.***
  Avoid: Challenging, condescending, patronizing or intimidating statements/questions.
  Instead: Be proactive, not reactive. Separate statements from personalities.
- ***Ask questions to clarify confusing/conflicting information.***
  Tip: Personalizing questions/statements reduces defensiveness.
  Example: "Something you said, Dr. Smith, stood out. However, I'm not sure if I understood everything you said. I think I heard you say that Fred isn't working up to his potential, but I can't remember discussing what Fred's potential is. Could we go back and spend a little time on this?"
- ***Ask specific questions which require us to examine/support/document our decisions/ recommendations.***
  Example: "Your progress reports indicate that Joe is reading independently at school. Yet his test scores look low. Could you help me understand how you were able to determine Joe's reading level?"
- ***Ask questions that invite answers.***
  Tip: Start with a "yes/no" question, then proceed to "wh" and "how" questions.
  Example: "Mary, did you fill out the application for the job?...What was the problem?..Where can you go for help?...What kind of help can we give you?...."
- ***Gain the perspective of others.***
  Tip: Ask yourself: "How would I feel...or what would I do if I were Dan [his mother, her teacher, his employer, her brother...etc.?"]
- ***Engage in creative problem-solving.***
  Tip: Pose the question "What can we do to move the vision we share to reality?"
- ***Allow periods of silence for reflection/formulating thoughtful responses.***
- ***Presume that the child/family members' opinions have more influence. The decisions of an adult child or family member with legal guardianship are legally those that count, and professional helpers must defer.***

Team Positions

In Mentoring-the-Mentor, we all share/assume interchangeable roles and functions to enhance collaboration and to build an effective team.

- ***We are the Coach when we:***
- Keep the meeting moving along the agenda.
- Summarize what we understand others to have said.
- Redirect us to focus on the child's goals/needs.
  Example: "John seems easily distracted in school. We've spent some time discussing changes at home which may be affecting John at school. Now, what can we do to help John keep his mind on his schoolwork?"

- Ask for discussion/recommendations leading toward creative problem solving/resolution of problems/issues and action planning.
  Example: "We all agree that Mary can learn to travel independently on public transportation with proper training. Who can teach Mary to use public transportation here at school? What community resources are available to help Mary use her skills to travel independently in the community?"
- Ask for consensus

- ***We are the Cheerleader when we:***
- Summarize what we have accomplished.
- Complement us on our individual and joint efforts.

- ***We are the Referee when we:***
- Develop contexts to accommodate different ways our teammates from other cultures might:
  - ~ Share/value personal space.
  - ~ Use/refrain from touching (e.g. embracing, handshaking, etc.)
  - ~ Use/avoid eye contact.
  - ~ Order time.
    Example: Plan informal social time before the meeting begins. Set starting times earlier for those who do not consider appointment times as precisely as in the mainstream U.S. culture.
- Help each other to understand the expectations, standards, and perceptions within the mainstream U.S. culture.
  Example: In some cultures it is disrespectful for students/family members to offer opinions that differ from professionals (teachers, employers, etc.). We must use honesty and respect to discuss problems or limitation of opportunities when customary mainstream practices are not adopted. We must use patience, encouragement, active listening, practiced silence, and positive feedback to overcome cultural barriers to collaboration and team building.

Game Plan

The captain (older child) or co-captain (family member) ideally leads the "huddle", using the following game plan:

- ***Minimize Surprises***
- Welcome/introduce each of us
- Review purpose/agenda for our meeting
- Remind us of the duration/adjournment time of our meeting
- Asks our availability to reconvene if time does not permit closure on all agenda items
- ***Share our vision for the child***
- ***Emphasize the child's strengths/capacities***
- ***Identify the child's need(s) for support***
- ***Engage in creative problem-solving***

- ***Share information/resources***
- ***Link our ideas/recommendations to those shared by other team members***
- ***Engage in action planning***
- Identify long-range goals (based on shared vision)
- Identify short-term objectives for each goal (accomplishable within one year or less)
- Identify activities to accomplish objectives.
- Share responsibility for implementing each activity or committing resources.
- Establish timelines for each responsible person to initiate/complete each activity to which they commit.
- Be available for follow-up after the meeting.

A Recorder, selected by the team:

- ***Writes/verbally summarizes the points of agreement and action plan developed.***
- ***Makes/shares copies of the summary with all of us.***

The Goal Line

Mentoring empowers and enables us to forge partnerships, one at a time, to grow collaborative teams. We are a "community of mentors" - role models, and trusted guides for each other - as we care for the children we share. Caring communities nurture and unleash the magic that is within each of our children.

Note: Kathryn Moery has a vested interest in family/professional collaboration. She is the mother of three children, one with Special Education needs; an educator, having taught at the secondary and post-secondary levels for 17 years; and program coordinator working with families and professionals. In her former position with the Parent Training and Information Center in Illinois, Mrs. Moery developed two model demonstration transition projects which were designated as Exemplary Programs for Family Professional Collaboration by the Regional Information Exchange. Currently, Mrs. Moery is the Outreach Training Coordinator at the Institute for Disabilities and Human Development (UAP) at the University of Illinois (Chicago). She coordinates training events for diverse audiences composed of consumers, family members and professionals, as part of her Mentoring-the-Mentor initiative, which she developed as a post-graduate student in the Leadership Development Program in Transition and Vocational Special Education at the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign). Ms. Moery invites your comments/feedback, and can be reached at IDHD, University of Illinois at Chicago, 1640 W. Roosevelt Road, Chicago, IL. 60608; 312-413-3027 or 312-413-2918 (Fax).

Resources:

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